

The consequences of war and displacement

Through her four recent projects, including tracing Ibn Battuta's journey, an Iraqi-Palestinian artist explores the crises due to manmade disasters



Al Tariqah (The Path) from Silsila series, Diasec, 2014



Sketch 3 from Negative's Capable Hands series, 2007

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US-based Iraqi-Palestinian artist Sama Alshaibi's latest exhibition in Dubai, *Collapse*, showcases four recent projects featuring photographs, installations, videos and performative works that explore themes of the consequences of war, the psychological impact of forced migration and the ecological crises caused by such manmade disasters. Curated by Maymanah Farhat, the show highlights Alshaibi's conceptual approach to photography and the layered and collapsing signs that are the essence of her work, especially her use of the body as a metaphor for spatial and temporal transgressions.

The centrepiece of the show is the multimedia series *Silsila*, first shown as part of the Maldives pavilion at the 2013 Venice Biennale. Here, the artist has traced the journey of 14th century Moroccan explorer Ibn Battuta, creating a chain of images that link the significant desert areas and shrinking water bodies of the MENA region to the island nation of Maldives, which is threatened by rising sea levels.

Alshaibi's performances at each site are inspired by Bedouin traditions and allude to the processes of purification, transcendence and renewal, signalling the mystical and historical continuity of these diverse environments.

Other projects displayed in the show include *Collapse* from 2014, her 2007 project *Negative's Capable Hands* and *Exodus*, a multimedia installation created in 2015.

Alshaibi spoke to *Weekend Review* about the themes and motifs in her work. Excerpts:

■ **What was the motivation to embark on the journey of *Silsila*?**

I began this project six years ago because I was tired of cultural production from this region that was all about war, and wanted to look at the great legacy of our region from pre-colonial times. I decided to metaphorically retrace the footsteps of the great traveller Ibn Battuta because he was willing to encounter different people and cultures, not afraid of the "other", and able to see the commonality between people.

Walking through the Middle East and North Africa felt as if I was transgressing borders and erasing boundaries, just as the desert and water do. Going to these places and creating art, perfor-

mances and videos, and participating in community events helped me to understand the "other" and remove the fear of the unknown.

Seeing how the Bedouins live in harmony with the environment was an inspiring and important part of the project because ultimately wars and migration are the result of an overpopulated world fighting over resources.

■ **What are the issues you have addressed in *Silsila*?**

The project addresses spiritual, socio-political and ecological issues. I have shot many of the images in the desert because that is where Islam was born and from where it spread. Bedouin poets have always described it as a space of inspiration through mindfulness.

I was interested in being mindful rather than reacting to the chain of war, conflict, broken families and communities. In many of the images of the desert there are no people but you can see the impact of excessive tourism on the environment. So, it was also about looking at the history of time by comparing Ibn Battuta's experience of these places with how they are today.

I also visited several oases because the diminishing fresh water in the MENA region is driving farmers and Bedouins to cities, where they have to compete for space and livelihood with foreign migrants. This leads to conflicts, which may appear to be political or religious, but

are essentially ecological. I also included pictures from the desert near my home in the US to tie the work to the story of my own migration.

The historical and ecological link to the rising sea levels that are threatening the Maldives is represented by an installation featuring the overturned keel of a boat symbolising a relic from the time when Ibn Battuta visited the island nation. The circular frames in this series convey the idea of repetition and recycling of stories, history, life and power struggles and how we do not learn from history.

■ **What do the feathers and bees in your work symbolise?**

I use feathers and bees' wings as a symbol of flight, either to freedom, or as a refugee or migrant. My mother was displaced from Palestine in 1948, and again in 1981 our family was displaced from Iraq. We moved from one country to another as unwanted migrants and lived illegally in the US for nine years before getting political asylum.

That was difficult, but I can also see the positive side of living in different places, meeting people from different cultures and having the freedom to travel that my American passport has given me. So, these motifs appear in my work both as positive or disturbing metaphors.

■ **What is the significance of putting your body in your photographs?**

My work is always about the body's relationship to land – either about land denied to the body due to national or religious identity, or the body being stuck in a land where it is subjected to suffering. I am now Chair and Associate Professor of Photography and Video Art at the University of Arizona, Tucson, and lead a good life.

However, my work is still about these issues because they are increasingly relevant today in terms of the mass migrations from the Middle East or the problems on the Mexican-American border close to my home.

I usually exclude my face from the images because my body represents not my identity, but the people, the land, or the issue.

■ **What was the concept behind *Negative's Capable Hands*?**

At that time I was frustrated by the way Western media was portraying Arab people and countries without knowing much about them. So, rather than talking about specific places such as Iraq and Palestine, I used images of

hands to address issues such as racial stereotyping, Western manipulation in the region, the breakdown of communities and migration.

■ **What is the project *Collapse* about?**

This split-channel video installation talks about the collapse of social structures because of the destruction of the environment and the consequent displacement of local communities.

I have used the crisis of "colony collapse disorder" among honeybees as a metaphor for the collapse of a community and the ecological crises of depletion of fresh water and global warming. The mournful sounds of the violin, played by a child while dead honeybees keep falling on him, expresses my frustration about the fact that all these important issues are being discussed only by cultural practitioners.

The smoke, usually used to pacify honeybees, represents the false narratives used by politicians, media and corporations to distract public attention from commercial activities that destroy the environment.

■ **What was the inspiration for your latest project *Exodus*?**

This work commemorates all those who are trying to save their families in the mass migrations happening today. The sculptures of human skeletons with bee wings made of steel, and the visuals of the keffiyeh and blood floating down the river speak about the loss of their land, their desire for safety, their inability to fly and the death that awaits them because of our inaction in helping them. Between the mosaic veins of the wings are video images that describe the trials of refugees.

The hollyhock, a plant indigenous to Syria, is like the relics that have been uprooted and displaced. The haunting sounds are the voices of my mother and grandmother singing Iraqi lullabies on the phone, while a child's hands are seen trying to wash our sins.

I want to invite viewers to walk through the talcum powder on the floor and to fully experience every element of this work, so they can truly empathise with the traumas and predicament of these "unwanted bodies".

All the projects in this show are about trying to find what is common between us rather than what tears us apart, and they are all connected to that body, that land and what that body experiences. Will it be pushed away, subjected to violence, disappear, or get every opportunity to thrive?

■ *Jyoti Kalsi is an arts-enthusiast based in Dubai.*

■ *Collapse will run at Ayyam Gallery, Alserkal Avenue, until January 14.*



Tasma' (Listen) Silsila series, Diasec, 2014